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What drives awareness and success in a new media environment?

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What drives awareness and success in a new media environment?

Given the relevance and challenges of social media marketing communications, we conducted a study of corporate blogs from Fortune Global 500 companies in order to examine which social media communication metrics, i.e., creators, content and interactions, have the greatest impact on the growth and size of an audience. This article gives an overview of the most important results and the main ideas behind them.



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In recent years, social media has penetrated modern society and consumers' everyday life. For example, ComScore suggests that one in five minutes online is actually spent on social networks.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that social media communications and social media marketing have now become a priority for marketers in nearly all industries nowadays. According to eMarketer, 88% of US companies with 100 or more employees are estimated to use social media for marketing purposes, which is more than double the adoption rate in 2008.² The rising importance of social media is also reflected at the budgeting level. US social media marketing spending will near US\$5b by 2016, up from around US\$1.6b in 2011, as indicated by Forrester Research.³ Many companies are often attracted to social media by the promise of being able to easily create and spread brand-related messages across a potentially wide and interested audience, at low costs. These companies often venture into social media by establishing dedicated presences on core platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or Blogspot, which range among the most frequently visited websites worldwide. Brands, companies and other organizations have created more than 15 million Facebook pages.⁴

Despite the fact that most companies have embraced social media as part of the marketing mix, there still remains a significant lack of knowledge as to what drives communication success in the social media environment. In 2010, HBR Analytic Services surveyed 2,100 companies. Only 12% of those companies surveyed, that

were either running or planning to run social media initiatives, thought that they were doing it effectively.⁵ Consequently, corporate attempts to leverage marketing opportunities in the social media ecosystem often turn out to be a highly experimental trial-and-error process. In light of the rising pressure on today's marketing budgets and the resulting need to identify, measure and optimize key performance drivers of social media marketing success, this issue has become particularly important.

The authors conducted a quantitative study of corporate blogs, with the aim of empirically examining effective communication traits and providing recommendations for managing corporate social media. Specifically, we studied the characteristics of social media authors, social media content and conversational interactions, which have the greatest impact on social media site traffic growth. We analyzed traffic growth as one of the major challenges companies are facing in deploying social media. Attracting an audience (i.e., fans, followers, subscribers and visitors) is critical to any social media presence. Effective communication always begins with awareness. For a corporate social media channel to have any impact, it must reach a significant number of people. In the following sections, we give a brief insight into the fundamentals of our study and present three major results.

Data and method

Data from our study consisted of distinct and complete sets of successive corporate weblog posts that were collected across a selected sample of blogs from 14 Fortune

Global 500 companies. We received detailed traffic information from these companies (i.e., page views and unique visitors) for each individual post on their corporate weblogs. In total, we collected 2,218 posts from the respective companies. From the information gathered off the post sites (e.g., pictures, texts and comments), we derived the following measures across a range of specific characteristics:

- ▶ The blog posts' authors (e.g., gender or hierarchy level)
- ▶ Weblog post content (e.g., multimodality or communication style)
- ▶ Interaction between post authors and readers (e.g., comments, responses, degree of conversational activity or corporate share of conversational activity)

To make a quantitative evaluation of the impact of these potential success factors on traffic growth, we estimated a negative binomial fixed effects model, allowing us to incorporate both the count character and the strong overdispersion of our dependent variable, as well as control for unobserved heterogeneity across the different weblogs.

1. M. Shaw, "The State of Social Media," Online Marketing Institute, 2012.

2. "The Year of Social?" eMarketer, www.emarketer.com/Article/Year-of-Social/1010386, accessed June 2014.

3. S. VanBoskirk, *US Interactive Marketing Forecast, 2011 to 2016*, Forrester Research, 2011.

4. J. Koetsier, Facebook: 15 million businesses, companies, and organizations now have a Facebook page, venturebeat.com/2013/03/05/facebook-15-million-businesses-companies-and-organizations-now-have-a-facebook-page, accessed June 2014.

5. *The new conversation: taking social media from talk to action*, Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 2010.



The more narrative corporate social media content is, the more visitors the corporate social media presence will attract.

The three key drivers of social media success

1. Author characteristics: be relevant

We investigated author-related social media effectiveness and the hierarchy level of a post's author. For example, corporate weblog authors could be lower-level employees (i.e., interns or "rank and file" employees), or they could be members of the higher management levels (i.e., CEO, owner, or top or middle managers). The examination revealed a **significant relationship between increasing levels of authority and the size of the audience.**

It should be kept in mind that social media is pull media, and consumers invest real effort (e.g., time and cognitive resources) when visiting and engaging in a corporate social media presence. Visitors want to be rewarded for these efforts in the form of expertise, competency or the kinds of insights that are unavailable in traditional media settings. Therefore, corporate social media presence is only successful if the right spokesperson is chosen.

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From the very beginning of the social media movement, communication norms and behaviors have not been set by traditional media gatekeepers, but rather by the audiences themselves.

2. Content characteristics: tell a story

In terms of content, one of the main questions we sought to answer was whether storytelling can be an effective means to transport company messages within a social media setting. Telling stories represents a central human activity and it is a powerful means of social communication. Research identified storytelling as key to communication efficacy.⁶ Information is stored, indexed and retrieved in the form of stories and, accordingly, people relate to the story in such narrative terms.

In the social media space, where everything is about connecting with peers, narrative stories represent the most common form of rhetoric when addressing an audience. Thus, it is not surprising that our results reflected a **highly significant influence of storytelling on traffic numbers**.

Alternatively, the more narrative corporate social media content is, the more visitors the corporate social media presence will attract. For this reason, it can make a huge difference if a brand posts the video of a new commercial or if the corporate author talks about their personal experiences (when, where, with whom, and what expectations and feelings were involved). Narrative storytelling can be applied not only in blogs, but also in social network sites. This is well demonstrated by the Facebook page of Walther, a fruit juice-producing German small and medium enterprise (SME), which is owned and run by Kirstin Walther. While the page's title picture makes it very clear that the respective social media presence refers to



the Walther Company, the profile picture shows the owner herself. Through this twist, it becomes possible for Kirstin Walther to provide her content in the form of personal and authentic narratives.

3. Interaction characteristics: be conversational

By analyzing interactions between corporate social media authors and readers, we showed that activity on a corporate social media presence, which is conversational in nature, draws more visitors. Social media, by its very nature, enables users to converse in iterative

cycles of postings and comments. One key reason for people to participate in online conversations is the value of interpersonal connectivity.⁷

6. A. G. Woodside, S. Sood and K. E. Miller, "When consumers and brands talk: storytelling theory and research in psychology and marketing," *Psychology & Marketing* 25(2): 97–145, 2008.

7. U. M. Dholakia, R. P. Bagozzi and L. K. Pearo, "A social influence model of consumer participation in network- and small-group-based virtual communities," *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 21(3): 241–263, 2004.

8. C. H. Baird and G. Parasnis: "From social media to social customer relationship management," *Strategy & Leadership* 39(5): 30–37, 2011.

In our study, we analyzed if “lurkers” (people who do not actively contribute to a social media site, but who usually make up the majority of the visitors)⁸ would reward the mere presence of others’ conversations through visits and revisits. In order to distinguish conversational communication (i.e., discussions) from reactionary communication (i.e., feedback), we defined a conversation as a series of at least two communication exchanges (i.e., consisting of at least three conversational turns and where the first turn is always represented by the corporate blog post) between two or more participants, in which the message of every newly added communicational contribution refers to messages that preceded it. In contrast, a reaction is defined by only one communication exchange (i.e., consisting of exactly two conversational turns, where the first turn is always represented by the corporate blog post).

The analysis revealed that visitors reward the presence of conversational activity. As such, **conversational activity significantly increases traffic on the social media presence**. This effect is at its highest when the company (or the social media authors) participate in the conversations. In other words: **company involvement in online conversations influences the effectiveness of corporate social media presences much more strongly than leaving the readers and visitors to debate the content on their own**.

We can conclude with the fact that, irrespective of whether a company fosters true dialogue with customers on a social media platform, it plays a considerable

and important role in the formation of corporate social media success. These results allow us to derive some actionable managerial recommendations. Firstly, a general corporate approach to social media performance measurement should not only use the number of comments as a reference for success, but rather the number of conversations present. Secondly, because visitors’ average time on a page is usually short, companies should use technical features that help them to increase the visibility of online conversations (i.e., by grouping related comments) as well as the visibility of corporate participation in there (i.e., by highlighting answers from the company).

Conclusion

From the firm’s perspective, social media has drastically changed the fundamentals of traditional marketing communications. Outlets such as weblogs, microblogs, social network sites or online discussion forums provide consumers with a wide range of new information and communication opportunities. The freedom to determine which messages and from whom are worthy of being received (and shared), as well as the ability to participate in (public) communication processes, is key.

To summarize, the social web has enabled consumers to finally become autonomous and self-directed (mass) communication actors. Consequently, from the very beginning of the social

Corporate social media presence is only successful if the right spokesperson is chosen.

media movement, communication norms and behaviors have not been set by traditional media gatekeepers, but rather by the audiences themselves. As a result, consumers’ expectations of how marketing communications should be embellished in this environment have evolved accordingly.

Effective social media management should, therefore, start by understanding and adopting consumers’ communication patterns. These are already well developed, having been established long before the brands entered the social spaces of the internet. In this context, our research provides three valuable recommendations for organizations looking to engage with their customers: be relevant and demonstrate your expertise, speak in a way that your consumers relate to and open up conversations with your visitors. This will enable your company to fit easily into the social media ecosystem and position you for success. ■